

SERMON TITLE: "Saved by Grace: Glorious Grace"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 1:3-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 17, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I've never been very coordinated. My body just doesn't always do what my mind tells it to. When I was a kid, growing by leaps and bounds, my body was even more awkward. When I would bump and bumble around, my mom would sometimes say to me, "Kim, we should have named you 'Grace.' Maybe then, you'd have been less clumsy." Yes, it would've been nice to have been born more poised and nimble, to have inherited more athletic competence and confidence. Fortunately, though, gracefulness isn't completely determined by our physical aptitude. As I grew from childhood into adolescence, I learned about a kind of grace that comes not from our bodies but from the heart of God. I learned that I could be saved by God's glorious grace.

As I told you last Sunday, this is the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his *95 Theses* on the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. All over the world, Christians of various types are taking time this fall to commemorate the important actions, ideas, and beliefs that initiated the Protestant Reformation. Here at First United Methodist Church, we're celebrating this anniversary by considering the very Protestant theme that we're saved neither by our own good works nor by the excess merits of the saints. Rather, we're saved by God's grace. Last Sunday, as we read from Genesis and from Paul's Letter to the Romans, we saw that we, like Abraham, can gain righteousness through faith, as we trust in God's gracious gift of salvation. Today, we turn to the New Testament Epistle to the Ephesians, a letter which revels in God's glorious grace.

1—GOD'S WILL & DESIRE

According to Ephesians 1:3-14, God's saving grace is glorious because, first of all, it originates in God's will and desire. Verse 4 tells us that God chose us in Christ. We don't receive God's merciful love and

forgiveness because we earn it, because we deserve it, or because of who our family is. Grace isn't an entitlement. Grace is a gift of God's will. When we receive glorious grace, it's because God wants to give us grace.

Verse 5 tells us that "God destined us for adoption as God's children." While a child can hope to be adopted and can embrace or rebel against an adoption, no child has the power to make an adoption happen. As an adoptive parent myself, I can tell you that social workers, judges, adoption agencies, and potential parents are the ones who initiate the adoption process. The same goes with God, in matters of grace. We children can open our hearts to the mercy of God or reject it, but only God can offer it to us. And God does offer this compassionate love to us because God very much wants to claim us, name us, and include us in God's family.

We see God's will and desire in the descriptive action words of this passage. In verses 6 and 8, we see that God "freely bestowed" and "lavished" this glorious grace upon us. In verse 9, the writer indicates that God "made known . . . his will, according to his good pleasure." In verse 10, God's will of glorious grace is identified as God's "plan." In verse 11, glorious grace is accomplished by God's purpose, counsel, and will. And according to verses 12 and 14, God does all this for our redemption and for the praise of Christ's and God's glory.

Do you see what I mean about intentionality? Glorious saving grace doesn't just happen or come upon us by accident, and it certainly doesn't originate in ourselves. This grace is glorious because it comes from God's divine will and desire.

2—ABUNDANT

A second aspect of glorious saving grace is that it's abundant. When Ephesians 1:6 and 8 tell us that God "freely bestowed" and "lavished" this grace upon us, there's a sense of largess, that God's grace is infinite in scope. Likewise, verse 3 indicates that this glorious grace is associated with "every spiritual blessing." And, if we don't yet comprehend how hugely amazing that is, we should note that we're talking

about every spiritual blessing “in the heavenly places.” In verse 7, “the riches of [God’s] grace” assure us that there’s no impoverishment, lack, or shortage. In verse 8, we see that this great resource comes “with *all* wisdom and insight.” According to verses 10 and 11, our God who offers this abundant grace will “gather *all* things” and “accomplish *all* things.” Do you hear how comprehensive that is? God isn’t stingy, and grace isn’t a little bit, to be doled out a pinch here and a pinch there, as a too-precious commodity. No, no, no. God’s grace is glorious because it’s so abundant.

The abundance of God’s glorious grace is like the abundant ways that our Hometown Mission Week events have been helping people in our community: cleaning up litter in Marriott-Slaterville; working a number of shifts at the Catholic Community Services Food Bank; serving several meals at the Lantern House homeless shelter; organizing building materials at the Habitat for Humanity ReStore; doing yard work at the Ogden Nature Center; and hosting booths at the Veterans Home Farmer’s Market. Had there not been complications that forced a cancellation, many of us would have spent yesterday morning assembling 10,000 meal kits of dried veggies, rice, and beans for third-world countries. And, tomorrow night, many of us will enjoy a dinner that will benefit the Wesley Charity Fund.

Not only have our Hometown Mission Week activities spread God’s grace around our community in generous and abundant ways, but our organizers also were gracious to all of us as they planned so many different ways for us to participate. Whether you needed a Saturday or weekday, morning, afternoon, or evening--those opportunities were available. Whether you wanted to do something indoors or outdoors, standing on your feet or sitting in a chair, our Hometown Mission Week organizers had you covered. Whether you wanted to participate at no cost to yourself or you wanted to spend some money on a T-shirt, a fundraiser dinner, or food for volunteers—those choices were available too. Just like our Hometown Mission Week was glorious because it had so many options and possibilities, God’s saving grace is glorious because it’s all-encompassing. No one is left out. There’s more than enough grace for everyone. God’s saving grace is glorious because it’s abundant.

3—LIFELONG

A third attribute of God's glorious saving grace is that it's lifelong. God's merciful love doesn't just come to us at one point along our journey. God's forgiving power is present and available for all the times of our lives. In verse 4, we see that "God chose us before the foundation of the world." John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism, called that "prevenient grace"—the grace that comes before we're even born. Even before we become aware of our need for God's mercy, God's loving compassion is already willing and able to claim us as God's children.

God's glorious grace is available to us later on too. Ephesians 1:7 reminds us of the redemption that comes to us through the blood of Christ. John Wesley called that "justifying grace"—the kind of grace provided to us when we have grown up enough to recognize our guilt and to seek and trust God's forgiveness. That kind of redeeming, or justifying, grace wipes away our sins and gives us a fresh start. To borrow the expression Jesus used with Nicodemus, it's as if we're "born again." While some Christians talk about being born again as a once-and-done thing, most Christians would testify to needing and obtaining this kind of glorious forgiving grace quite regularly throughout our lives. Whenever we have a pang of guilt, whenever we become aware that we've done something wrong, we can go before our Lord to seek and receive glorious redeeming grace.

But just because God wants to offer us a lifetime of grace doesn't mean we should callously keep on sinning. No conscientious Christian feels good about abusing the mercy of God. Consequently, our goal is to become more and more like Christ, to become better and better disciples, to become more and more holy, to become more and more perfected in God's love. According to Ephesians 1:12 and 13, God's desire for us is that we would "live for the praise of God's glory," "marked with the . . . Holy Spirit," as "God's own people." John Wesley taught that this ongoing faith formation, spiritual maturation, and holiness is possible for us because of God's "sanctifying grace."

Before we're born, as we come to an age of understanding right from wrong, and as we mature in experience and faith—at every step along life's journey, there's grace available to us. God's saving grace is glorious because it's lifelong.

CONCLUSION

On Tuesday, as part of our Hometown Mission Week, I volunteered at the food bank. In the morning, I assisted the clients as they came through with their grocery carts and selected one, two, three, or four items from each set of shelves—depending on how many people were in their families.

Since I had just recently returned from Mexico, I enjoyed that opportunity to interact with the people, many of whom spoke Spanish. With the English speakers, I engaged in other ways. With one fellow, our conversation was about different ways to say what a good day it was. I suggested the word *marvelous*, but he didn't think that word would be good for him because he thought it sounded too feminine. I couldn't figure out why *marvelous* would be feminine, but, OK. The customer is always right, right? He preferred the words *great*, *terrific*, *wonderful*, and *fantastic*.

At that moment, I don't think either one of us came up with the word *glorious*. That might have been a little too over-the-top for him. But compared to all the people suffering this week from hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires, and electrical outages—even that fellow so poor that he had to do his grocery shopping at the food bank recognized that it was no run-of-the mill day. Receiving food assistance from Catholic Community Services made his day great, terrific, wonderful, and fantastic—maybe even glorious.

When we receive the gift of salvation from God, it's like that for us. The saving grace of God is glorious because it originates in God's will and desire. It's glorious because it's abundant. And it's glorious because it's lifelong. When we're saved by grace, it's not just any grace. It's glorious grace!